

## Notes on five species of Iraqi birds

by S. MARCHANT

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### 1 *Glareola nordmanni* (Nordm.)

Most recent authors (Meinertzhagen,<sup>8</sup> Taxonomic Sub-Committee,<sup>10</sup> Voous<sup>15</sup>) regard this bird as a colour-phase of *Glareola pratincola* (L.), and personally I believe that this is so, but both forms are customarily regarded as occurring in Iraq. The Taxonomic Sub-Committee<sup>10</sup> says that "*G. nordmanni* has been found breeding in Iraq alongside *G. pratincola*": Meinertzhagen<sup>8</sup> says the same. The Handbook,<sup>16</sup> however, queries this point.

The occurrence of *nordmanni* in Iraq, as far as I have been able to discover, rests on two specimens shot by Pitman at Felluja on 15th April, and mentioned by Ticehurst,<sup>11</sup> and one skin in the British Museum, collected at Khan Nuktar, Baghdad, on 2nd November (a very late date for *Glareola* in Iraq). The other *nordmanni* skins in the British Museum were obtained at Jeddah, Najran, south Palestine and Arabi Island in the Persian Gulf in April, July and October. All these specimens were probably birds of passage.

Pitman (in Ticehurst<sup>11</sup>) also had sight records of *nordmanni* between Felluja and Baghdad, at Lake Aggar Quf, and Hindiyah in May, July and August, which is doubtless the basis for supposed breeding in Iraq. McGeoch (pers. comm.) informs me that he had close (3-5 m.) views of three birds at Ramadi on 27th April which he considered to have black axillaries and on 31st May certainly saw one black-winged bird out of eight at Habbaniyah. I believe that all these records apply to birds that could also have been on migration.

It has been recognised that separation of *normanni* and *pratincola* in the field by the colour of the axillaries is not at all easy (Hayman<sup>4</sup>). During three and a half years in Iraq I never satisfied myself that I saw a single *nordmanni* out of hundreds of birds. At one colony of about twenty pairs near Baghdad in 1962 I felt sure that none was present, while I saw none at another larger colony in 1961 (Marchant,<sup>6</sup> Marchant & Macnab<sup>7</sup>).

Clearly there is as yet no definite evidence for breeding of *nordmanni* in Iraq, whether alongside *pratincola* or independently, and in fact the occurrence of *nordmanni* in the country has seldom been proved.

### 2 *Otus brucei* (Hume)

Peters<sup>9</sup> retains the specific identity of this bird, giving the range as Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Turkestan from south of the Aral Sea to eastern Persia, Baluchistan and Gilgit: and recorded from Sind and several localities in India. Races of *Otus scops* (L.) which may meet or supposedly overlap the range of this bird are *turanicus* in Transcaspiya, Bukhara, northern Persia and Armenia; and *pulchellus* in Russia east of Long. 35°E, Caucasus and S.W. Asia, which last winters in the upper Nile Valley, and perhaps elsewhere. Meinertzhagen,<sup>8</sup> correctly in my opinion, regards *brucei* as a race of *scops*. Admittedly it is rather distinct, being essentially drab isabelline with none of the russet markings of *pulchellus* and other races, but such plumage characteristics are relatively insignificant: its behaviour and breeding habits seem to be identical with those of *scops*. The evidence for sympatry of *brucei* with *turanicus* and *pulchellus* is poor.

The matter is blurred by migration since skins of *pulchellus* in the B.M. were taken at various places in the Middle East in March, April and September, even one from Huleh, Palestine in June, but I judge that all of these were migrants. There are also *pulchellus* skins from Teheran, Fars and elsewhere in Iran in May and June, which are much more likely to represent the breeding population. On the other hand the occurrence of *brucei* to the north-east of Iraq is not well established by B.M. skins, there merely being one April bird from the Aral Sea and one from "Asiatic Russia"—both old specimens and, I consider, of doubtful significance.

From my own records (Marchant,<sup>5,6</sup> Marchant & Macnab<sup>7</sup>) and those of Chapman and McGeoch<sup>1</sup>. (and pers. comm.), I have little doubt that *brucei* is only a breeding visitor to Iraq from March to October. Outside my own dates I have only been able to find one December skin in the B.M. collection and two February skins, one in the B.M. and the other in the Iraq Nat. Hist. Museum. My only record of another race of *scops* in Iraq was on 28th February, evidently on passage. It is unknown where *brucei* winters. Though there seem to be no intermediates between *brucei* and other races of *scops* among the skins which I have seen in London and Baghdad, *brucei* is probably best regarded as a distinct race of *scops*; and I suspect that it does not extend far into Iran as a breeding bird, where it is replaced by *pulchellus*.

### 3 *Coracias benghalensis* L.

Meinertzhagen<sup>8</sup> regards this bird as a race of *C. garrulus* L., and Voous<sup>15</sup> perpetuates this claim of conspecificity with reservation. In recent years *benghalensis* has extended its range many miles up the Tigris and may now be found slightly north of Baghdad (Marchant<sup>5,6</sup>), where with little doubt it breeds in small numbers, though no nest has yet been seen. Throughout south and central Iraq the race *semenowi* of *C. garrulus* is a common summer breeding visitor. No hybrids nor interbreeding has been detected. Considering also the distinctly different plumage patterns of the two birds, it seems that they should be treated as separate species, perhaps within a superspecies.

### 4 *Sylvia melanocephala* (Gm.)

Vaurie<sup>14</sup> maintains the bird known as *Sylvia mystacea* Ménétries as a full species, but many recent authors are inclined to regard it as a race of *melanocephala* (Voous<sup>15</sup>, Harrison<sup>3</sup>). Following Dresser<sup>2</sup> who quotes Ménétries' original description of *mystacea*, the distinction of this bird from nominate *melanocephala* and *momus* rests on the blackness of the crown and nape and its contrast with the grey back, and the vinous tinge on the under parts. In *mystacea* the crown and nape are a dull black, not a deep black: this merges into the grey of the back and is not sharply and clearly contrasted: the throat and breast are pale chestnut or dull vinous gradually fading to white on the abdomen. *Mystacea* is also a larger bird than *momus* and, according to Ménétries, has yellow eyelids, whereas in races of *melanocephala* they are dull or brick red, or salmon-pink.

*Mystacea* is usually said to inhabit S.E. Russia south to the north Caucasus, Transcaucasia, Iraq, Palestine, throughout Iran east to southern and northern Afghanistan, north through Transcaspia to the Aral Sea and so on further east: it migrates through Iraq and Iran to winter in southern Arabia and north-east Africa (Vaurie<sup>14</sup>). *S. momus* lives in Syria and Palestine, being essentially sedentary, while nominate *melanocephala* ranges to



Asia Minor (Vaurie,<sup>14</sup> Handbook<sup>16</sup>), with other races on Cyprus, Crete and in Egypt. I have been unable to find any evidence that the breeding ranges of *momus* and *mystacea* overlap in Syria and Palestine.

I do not consider that the majority of Iraqi skins in the B.M. are particularly close to *mystacea*. One has to be careful of confusion with migrants, since admittedly true *mystacea* moves out of the area north of Iraq in winter, while in central Iraq at any rate no or few individuals of the *melanocephala-mystacea* group are present between November and February (Marchant<sup>5, 6</sup>). Considering the B.M. material collected in or near Iraq from February to October, all skins are only very faintly washed vinous on the under parts, if there can really be said to be any vinous wash at all, except one February skin from Kumait and one March skin from Abadan. These exceptions were probably *mystacea* on passage. In contrast all skins collected in Iran and Transcaucasia in March and April are deeply vinous below. Forty-two other *mystacea* skins, mostly with strong vinous wash, from Arabia and Eritrea were all taken between September and March and were clearly wintering birds. Further there are eighteen Iraqi skins in the collection of the Bombay Nat. Hist. Society, including probably eleven of Ticehurst's<sup>11</sup> collection. Two of these are useless, because of foxing, but the under parts of eleven others are described as white or cartridge-buff with no or very pale and partial vinous wash. The remaining five are described below as vinous or pale vinous. This hardly suggests close affinity of this character with *mystacea* for the majority of Iraqi birds and even the few that could fully be regarded as belonging to *mystacea* were all probably passage birds (one each in February, March, April, September and October).

Admittedly all the Iraqi skins which I have seen and probably those in the Bombay Nat. Hist. Society's collection can be separated from races of *melanocephala* by the duller black head and lack of sharp contrast with the back. Yet on balance of characters and consideration of proved distribution, I cannot see any valid reasons for the continued recognition of *mystacea* as a separate species. Further I have little doubt that with a really comprehensive series of breeding birds it would be found that the Iraqi population is mid-way between *momus* and *mystacea*, being closer to the former in the lack of vinous wash on the under parts and to the latter in their dull crown merging into the colour of the back.

In this connexion some support comes from field observation at Baghdad. There I have looked as carefully as possible at many breeding males without once being able to see any vinous wash on the under side: yet, during the first week of April birds with obvious vinous wash appeared suddenly and as suddenly disappeared. McGeoch (pers. comm.) agrees with me that the summer residents at Habbaniyah appear essentially white below in the field, though he had records of vinous birds in March. Repeatedly I have seen the non-vinous, resident, singing males behave aggressively towards the vinous birds and drive them out of their territories. Presumably these vinous birds are true *mystacea* on northward passage. I may add that as far as I have ever been able to see, the breeding birds at Baghdad have red eyelids.

There are two B.M. skins, collected in January at Mosul by La Personne for Cox and Cheesman and reported on by Ticehurst<sup>12</sup> who identified them, correctly in my opinion, as nominate *melanocephala*. He adds that

they were not uncommon at that time and place. The only surprising thing in this is the note of their frequency, because no subsequent authors have recorded any race of *melanocephala* as anything but unusual between November and February. I can well believe, however, that some birds may be in the country at this time and that such could indeed be winter visitors from the breeding range of nominate *melanocephala*.

#### 5 *Turdoides* species

Although originally confused, Ticehurst<sup>11</sup> showed that there were two distinct, but similar species of *Turdoides* in Iraq, *T. caudatus* and *altirostris*. Vaurie<sup>13</sup> gave a further detailed diagnosis. From these accounts *T. caudatus* ranges in various races from India as far north-west as Baghdad and Khanaqin, whereas *altirostris* is confined to Iraq and south-west Iran from Khanaqin and Qasr-i-Shirin to Ahwaz, the lower Karun river and Fao. Both authors, however, stress the different habitat of *altirostris* which is said to be often or mainly in reed beds: in detail neither author records the species between Khanaqin and the Kut-Amara district.

British Museum skins merely add one *caudatus* from Felluja, twenty-five miles west of Baghdad (see also Chapinan and McGeoch<sup>1</sup> and Harrison<sup>3</sup>). There are, however, four specimens of *altirostris*, collected by the writer at Baghdad, where Mr. B. E. Allhouse (pers. comm.) also recently got a skin. Chapman and McGeoch<sup>1</sup> and Harrison<sup>3</sup> recorded *altirostris* at Habbaniyah, Saqlawiyah on the Euphrates opposite Habbaniyah, and south of Felluja. McGeoch (pers. comm.) informs me that it was regular at Habbaniyah, and the only species present.

It seems plain, then, that *altirostris* occurs much more evenly and commonly throughout south and central Iraq than one might suppose from Ticehurst<sup>11</sup> and Vaurie,<sup>13</sup> and indeed that it may be the commoner of the two species. It is of further importance to note that it is by no means confined to a reedy habitat. At Baghdad my specimens were taken in an area of market gardens, orchards, palm and poplar thickets, where they must have been plentiful. There were no reeds in the vicinity. Ticehurst<sup>11</sup> records similar habitat at Basrah. In the field I had always assumed that the very common babblers were all *caudatus* and could never satisfy myself that I saw any *altirostris*: but the separation of two such similar birds in the field must be difficult and I attach little importance to my assumption. It is unfortunate that a serious effort was not made to distinguish them, because several nests were found, none of which can now be certainly attributed to either species. Moreover, I consider that previous accounts of the breeding of both species in Iraq (Ticehurst<sup>11</sup>) should be read with caution unless the breeding birds were collected at the same time, as they probably were by Cumming at Fao (*altirostris*).

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## On the Yellow-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus goiavier* (Scop.)

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Though the difference between the subspecies *analisis* and *personatus* is not very distinct in much of the material before me (because there seems to be much overlapping in specimens from the western parts of Java and the islands south of Sumatra) there is no reason to unite them.

It seems justifiable to consider birds from Sebesi and Legundi Islands as *personatus* and those obtained close by Ujung Kulon, on Princes Island and Klapper Island as *analisis*, though in some birds of Ujung Kulon the superciliaries are very light which gives rise to the supposition that this territory is of a mixed population.

Birds from Kangean fit well in the small series (recently collected) of *analisis* but they average in being a trifle darker above. Comparing fresh material with skins which were stored for a considerable time is of little use because of discolouring, especially on the wings and upper parts.

When comparing our series recently secured on the Karimundjawa Islands with freshly collected skins of *analisis* and *personatus* they all differ because of their much darker pure olive-brown upper parts, which, moreover, are less squamated than is the case in both these races, thus resembling *gourdini* known from Borneo.

Though in old material of *gourdini* before me this is only partly the case, Karimundjawa birds seem closer related to this last race than to *analisis* or *personatus*, also when comparing the under parts. They are much darker, especially on the sides of the belly and sometimes also on the chest than *analisis* or *personatus*, though there are some recently collected birds from Legundi and Sebesi Island which also show these dark flanks but they differ much from Karimundjawa birds on account of the clear white superciliaries and less uniformly coloured upper parts.

On the cheeks this last population is duller than in *analisis* or *personatus*, maybe on this point, too, resembling *gourdini*. The superciliaries are very dull and the ear-coverts dark.